The BiblioFiles: Betsy Bird & Team Tolo

Premiere date: December 20, 2022

DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents The BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi, this is Dr. Dana with a very special edition of The BiblioFiles. Today we're interviewing the creative team for Tolo, an original choose-your-path virtual adventure released by the Cotsen Children's Library.

You are Tolo, a mouse, an apothecary's apprentice. When sickness strikes the distant village of Mossden, you must make a treacherous mountain crossing with the cure. From ice chutes to surprise attacks, the decisions are yours as you navigate the dangers and obstacles in your path.

Tolo is illustrated by David Deen, who grew up sketching the monsters and beasts in his brother's Dungeons & Dragons manuals and reading fantasy books. After earning a BA in Art from the University of North Texas, David worked as a computer game artist before embarking on his freelance illustration career.

Tolo is written by me, Dana Sheridan. And since I can't interview myself, I'm delighted to introduce today's guest host, Betsy Bird. In addition to being a super librarian, Betsy Bird hosts two podcasts, has a popular blog called A Fuse #8 Production for School Library Journal, and reviews for Kirkus and The New York Times.

Betsy is also the author of two picture books, co-author of Wild Things: Acts of Mischief in Children's Literature, and editor of the middle grade anthology, Funny Girl. Her most recent release is Long Road to the Circus, a children's novel illustrated by Caldecott Award winning artist, David Small.

BETSY BIRD: David Deen and Dana Sheridan, welcome to The BiblioFiles. And it is such a delight to get a chance to talk to the two of you. This is really exciting. I am just delighted by this entire project and how it even came to be. I guess the way to begin is to begin at the beginning.
So Dana, what we're talking about here are, quote, unquote, "digitally-born" choose your own adventure books. Except we can't use that phrase, so pick-your-path books, let's say. So what does that mean? What is this? Where does this come from? How did this idea even come about?

DR. DANA: The idea came about because the Cotsen Children's Library, we have quite a few very successful virtual escape rooms. And as we watch them, the attendance in them, rise and rise and rise during the pandemic, we thought, well, what else can we do to provide for people virtually? What's something kind of unique that we might be able to do? And I remembered back, on the bookshelves of my home, I have two Dungeons & Dragons choose your own adventure books. I have Mountain of Mirrors and Revenge of the Rainbow Dragons. So shout out there.

And I thought, well, it seems like this would be a really good thing to try virtually. This is something that anyone can come to. It's easy to click through. Why don't we try this? And that would also be a great way to feature a writer and an illustrator. And so after we decided that, Tolo appeared in my mind almost immediately, this big snow field and this mouse standing on it, struggling. And I thought, “wow, here's a story.” So what the heck, I'm going to try writing this and see what happens.

BETSY BIRD: I want to talk to David, here, about how you got wrapped up in this project. How did you two connect? How did you find this?

DAVID DEEN: Well, I was on a trip down to Texas, visiting my parents, this past summer. And I got a message, through Instagram, from Dana, asking me if I was interested. And any time you get something like that, just out of the blue, there's a certain—is this person real? Is this a phishing? But I went ahead and responded. And it was absolutely real. And the project she started describing sounded like a dream project for me to work on. And that's where it went from.

BETSY BIRD: I have to say that when randomly, you hear from Princeton, it does have a little more weight than some of the other places you might hear from [LAUGHTER].

DAVID DEEN: But you don't know if it's real or not.
BETSY BIRD: It's true. You're like, oh, sure, Princeton wants me to do a book. I'm sure, yeah. But as it turns out, they actually did. And it turned out so beautifully.

DR. DANA: Yes, I want to add, here, that when you look at David's illustrations—I knew that there needed to be a certain quality to the Tolo illustrations. There needed to be—I don't want to call it a hard edge. I just want to call it absolute reality. And I also knew instinctively, even before I read about his Dungeons & Dragons sketching, which I've done too, you really need to be into that to understand sword hilts and cloaks. You need to be someone who wanted to be one of these characters in the manuals. And his illustrations had that quality. And they're just so heartfelt and realistic and emotive that it was just perfect, the perfect match for the story.

BETSY BIRD: Well, I want to ask about what your influences were then, to a certain extent, because we're mentioning Dungeons & Dragons, which is having a real renaissance these days, I have to say…

DR. DANA: No pun intended. [LAUGHS]

BETSY BIRD: Yea, I didn't even see that one as I said it. Oh, I'm taking credit for it now. [LAUGHS]

DR. DANA: You got it. [LAUGHS]

BETSY BIRD: Yeah, exactly. I meant to say that. But yeah, it's on podcast, it's on TV shows, it's on all sorts of things. So you've got that influence on the one hand. But the story, I mean, I have to say the first thing I think of—and I'm a different generation—but is Redwall. When you're seeing furry creatures with swords, there's one original. It's not the most original, obviously, Wind in the Willows, whatever. But it is kind of Redwall. So what were your influences for this? What did you draw on? What were some things you might have read as a kid that would have had a hand in it? And this is to both of you.

DR. DANA: I'll let David go first.

DAVID DEEN: Oh, OK. That was interesting. One of the ways I knew that I really wanted to do this—because once you first started talking to me, she mentioned Redwall and Mouse Guard and books like that, that had been a part of my life, in the case of Redwall from my childhood. Mouse Guard is more recent. But that let me know immediately, this is someone that knew what she
was talking about and was into the same stuff that I am. But then on top of that, when I was a kid, I also—just going beyond books, watched things like the—as a book it was *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*—*Secret of NIMH*, that's what it was.

BETSY BIRD: *Secret of NIMH*, yeah.

DAVID DEEN: I grew up watching *Secret of NIMH*.

BETSY BIRD: Oh, that's a movie.

DAVID DEEN: And it's the same idea of mice going on this adventure, anthropomorphic. They're wearing clothes but they still very much look like mice. And so even when you get out of—I guess it would still be called fantasy, but not like the *D&D* style of fantasy—that style of adventure and characterization had just been a part of my whole life. So I'll let Dana go from there.

DR. DANA: I also want to say another thing about David and his illustrations and his location. He's located in Colorado. And you can just look at his work and also see mountains and snow.

BETSY BIRD: The man knows how to do a mountain.

DR. DANA: Yeah, exactly. I loved the idea that *Tolo's* illustrator was sitting in the mountains and breathing in that air. And those are some serious mountains. So that was another quality, too, that comes out in it, when you look at the landscapes behind it. Even though they're simple, it's like the feeling is all there. So for me, for influences, *Mrs. Frisby and The Rats of NIMH*. Of course that was a favorite of mine, and *Watership Down* for its sheer epicness and how it does not shy away from horrible, horrible things happening. Like really bad. That was a very formative children's book in my life, along with *A Wrinkle In Time*. When kids ask me—and I get asked this all the time in my line of work—what were your favorite books as a kid, those two immediately come to mind. And fantasy has always been part of my landscape because again, like David, peeking into my brother's *D&D* monster manuals and just really being attracted to that because I'm a horseback rider. So anything with horses, any fantasy film, is just guaranteed horses. So the monster manuals were full of things with hooves. And I would sketch them too. That's how I actually learned how to sketch dragons. But I am in no way, at any level, able to illustrate *Tolo* [LAUGHING] at all, period, full stop.
BETSY BIRD: I'm just imagining the blurb for *D&D*. Full of things with hooves, [LAUGHS].

DR. DANA: Four stars.

BETSY BIRD: Four stars.

DR. DANA: Five wands. [LAUGHS]

BETSY BIRD: And I love this conversation, by the way, because I am currently reading my son Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH. So there you go. And the big debate is do we watch the *Bluth* movie or not. And we could go both ways on that one. That was a whole era of filmmaking, wasn't it? Very interesting.

DR. DANA: Right. That one often makes a list of scariest films for children and also, ironically, *Watership Down*, as well.

BETSY BIRD: What different level than that. That one takes you places [LAUGHTER].

DR. DANA: Right, it sure does.

BETSY BIRD: Oh, yeah. We just aren't horrifying our children enough these days, which speaking of horrifying children, now I grew up with the choose your own adventure books, in which you died on a regular basis. That was part of the deal with a choose your own adventure, was the death.

Now you guys have gone into a slightly different direction with these books. There is a significant decrease in death, I would say. And so depending on how you do things, you aren't horribly eaten by a snake, I'd say, at any point, or a hawk or an owl or—So when you were writing these, Dana, I was taking it you were writing for even a younger level. And I have found, reading to my own younger son, reading choose your own adventure, pick-your-path types of things works really well with kids because it makes it a more interactive experience with the parents. So when you were making this, first of all, did you read these pick-your-path books as a kid? And then how did you envision the audience for it?
DR. DANA: Yes, I did read them. I still have two of them on my shelf. And I did reread them going into it. I was obsessed with *Mountain of Mirrors*. I was just obsessed. I don't know why. There was another one, *The Pillars of Pentagon*, I think—I don't have that one. I should try to find it on eBay.

The death question is one I thought about long and hard because *Tolo* was written during the pandemic. And I knew that it was going to probably premiere towards the end of it, even though this pandemic is not over for many folks out there and many families out there. So I was surrounded by a very real threat of death. And so it was very important for me to not have that, even though that's an iconic thing of choose your own adventures, for me, I very specifically, one, didn't want that in the books. And two, I wanted all the endings to lead to that same field at the end and the same ending. And hopefully, readers won't find that too disappointing. But it was very intentional, for these six story lines, for kids to hear six times, you're OK, you made it, you're in a good place. But I was very intentional that there would be some mice left behind. There would be some very emotional moments. There would be some times when you're not sure exactly who's going to make it because, as these mice are left behind, you don't really know. Is the rescue party going to make it back, what's going to happen, will another creature find them before the rescue party, those sorts of things.

But I never, ever wanted to have the kids reading the story to separate from these characters because there was too much of that happening in the world, with the pandemic. And I definitely did not want that.

BETSY BIRD: It makes sense because there's a larger implication. It's not just who would die as *Tolo*. There would be ramifications if Tolo does not succeed in the journey—

DR. DANA: That's right, yeah.

DAVID DEEN: —much greater than simply one little mouse.

DR. DANA: Right. And also as a single mom, leading my two children through the pandemic, I also didn't want to let anybody down as far as characters or readers. So Tolo, as you said, is carrying a lot and everything, actually, for everyone. And that's very much how I feel as a mom,
trudging through the pandemic. It was terrifying. And so I wanted to make sure that I kept putting one foot in front of the other too, as a writer. So there you have it.

BETSY BIRD: Well, and that's a sentence that I remember, when you go to that field, is just the words, you are safe.

DR. DANA: Yeah.

BETSY BIRD: I think that's just a great thing to find in any book.


BETSY BIRD: You want someone to say that, yeah. That's absolutely true. So David, when you were making the art, then, you could have done it in a more mature, realistic style. But you had a very specific kind of style that you chose for the book. How did you come to that style?

DAVID DEEN: I'd have to say any time I'm developing a particular visual language for a project, first I start with the text and try to figure out what the text is aiming for. And that just felt like what it was aiming for in this case. And you asked earlier about choose your own adventures. I didn't write this. So maybe the question doesn't really apply to me.

BETSY BIRD: No, go ahead.

DAVID DEEN: But I also read the choose your own adventures. And the one I remember the most was—I might get this name a little bit wrong—but The House On Chimney Rock, which was a little bit more horror themed. And those books were a little more mature than some of the choose your adventures they have now, that are very much geared for a younger age, that didn't exist when I was a kid. And I grew up with-- we've already talked about The Secret of NIMH--and Watership Down and The Dark Crystal.

DR. DANA: Oh, yeah.

DAVID DEEN: I would argue that Watership Down isn't necessarily geared for children. But the others were geared for children but still had a definite dark edge to them. And when I was doing the illustrations, even though I geared the style at the range, I did, I still had times where maybe I
would show teeth and make things a little darker than [LAUGHTER] intended. And Dana would have to say, bring that down a little bit.

[DANA LAUGHS]

DR. DANA: There was one epic illustration. I was like, oh, this is so amazing but oh, we can't do this. There are weapons flying and stuff. It was so good. But I was like, this is going to be too stressful for the kids. And then what David then came back with is gorgeous and in some ways, full of tension. And just—it's an amazing—it's the owl. I don't need to say anymore. I'm sure all of our readers will find this illustration. It's just so-- it's gorgeous. Just amazing.

BETSY BIRD: That's very cool. So when I was a kid and I would read these books—and it wasn't just choose your own adventure, I should say. My husband somehow managed to find the Zork books. And he's been reading those to my son. So I don't even know where he found those. [LAUGHTER] Dana knows what I'm talking about. Yeah, Zork. So when I was a kid, I had a very specific system, a system that I'm sure many, many children had, where you simply placed your fingers in the pages where you would go back to because it was really hard to remember where you had been. And when you died, you didn't want to go all the way back to the beginning so you would go back to other things.

In this case, the format is so different because you're online and you have a back button. So there's no way to lose where you've been. But it also makes it, I find, it a lot easier to find all—because kids want kids want to find all the different choices. That's what's so interesting about this kind of storytelling is that you're making choices but you also have the ability to remake that choice depending on the outcome.

So when you were making this, or when you were even writing this, Dana first of all, how long did it take to write all these different—how did you decide how many different paths to split off from? And then how did you manage to loop them all back together because that's a bit of gymnastics in and of itself. And did you have a map? Did you have a map? Because you have to keep track of where these things are.

DR. DANA: So what I'd like to answer is that I just had a detailed blueprint and a solid, concerted effort and I just graced through it. But the true answer is I was a total mess. [LAUGHS] I just kept on writing these scenes. And the scenes that popped in my head, I would
write those. I had this visualization. I had some characterizations. I talked to one of my friends, who is a seasoned writer. And she was giving me all these recommendations, which I ignored. It was a mess. [LAUGHS] So I spent a lot of time just writing scenes, writing scenes, writing scenes. And then finally my assistant, Katie, was like, stop it. Stop. We're getting out this whiteboard. We're going to map things out.

And we put together this twisty, crazy, flowchart of where everything went and scenes that were needed. And then, with that kind of external organization, I managed to figure out what needed to be added and what needed to be changed and what needed to bridge things. But for a long time too, there was a lot of research on different ways you can get hurt in the mountains in winter. So it was very helpful to have my little sister, Ann, who's the character Tully, actually, because my sister is a climber, tell me about things like tree wells and stuff like that. And so another issue with Tolo, it took me a while to write it, probably about a year, because I was also doing other things.

And Tolo was written very short, meaning I knew it was going be on screen. I knew we didn't want kids to click through a bunch of texts and screen. So I actually had to write—I would write these long scenes and then I'd have to edit them by a third. So I had to really, really condense them into a simpler story. And that actually takes some time too. So yeah. Yeah, was I graceful? No. I was in my sweatpants, snarfing chocolate and being crabby. [LAUGHS] Chocolate. Lots of chocolate. Yeah. [LAUGHS]

BETSY BIRD: I'm just imagining a big board with lots of red string, connecting the different things like you see in the movies, the TV, and it's like, oh, go here. So David, talking about this and all the different paths that this can take, one way or another, one thing that's really interesting to me is what you chose to illustrate and what not to illustrate. So in some cases, I was curious as to, did you have a set number of illustrations you were working towards? Or did you just read through it and just see, visually, this is where a piece of art could go here, where go here. How did you figure out what art to make and how much of it to make?

DAVID DEEN: Well, from the beginning, talking to Dana, we knew that we wanted 20 total illustrations. And there were 18 sections. And so that made for a nice one illustration per section plus two extras. And we would have to figure out what to do with that later.
And the only section that posed a problem with that was the lake section, where it had two different scenes in it. And I couldn't figure out which one needed to be done more. And so we ended up doing both. And so that used one of the two extras. We got the owl and we discovered Rin, the hedgehog. And so then on top of that—we knew that we needed one for each section. And so then I would just read each section and figure out which of those both captured the flavor and intent of the scene and presented the most visually-appealing image. And so as I was trying to figure out what images to do, I always had in mind to try to present a nice variety. So not everyone's going to be straight on. I tried to come at some from above, some from below, and some pretty extreme views, but different amounts of light—some of them are bright sun, some of them are very dim—and just try to keep all of them varied so that none of them just feel like a re-skin of another. They all present something new, and different moods, too. So you have some moods that are more dark and ominous, some that are more in your face, some that are more quiet and thoughtful images.

And so I always kept in mind, what have I not presented yet? Have I not presented one that's more about them just resting and recovering for a moment? And so in a couple of cases, like with the cave, I tried to present that part of it. So yeah, that would be about it, just trying to present a variety but still capture the essence of each section.

DR. DANA: And you should also keep an eye on the mice's tails in all the illustrations because their inner thoughts and characteristics are expressed through their tails. It's—really cool to see.

BETSY BIRD: That was really deep. And it actually—just hearing you speak just now, it brought to mind the fact that you have an extra additional challenge. And that is continuity.

DR. DANA: Oh, yeah [LAUGHS]

BETSY BIRD: If you've got so many different ways that are all coming to a single, unified point, and then you've got to make that illustration, at the end, makes sense from all the different choices that were made, was that difficult? It sounds difficult when I say it.

DAVID DEEN: It wasn't too bad.

BETSY BIRD: Oh, good.
DAVID DEEN: When I first started, I reverse engineered what it sounds like they did on the whiteboard. I took all of the different segments and mapped them out, had arrows running through all the different paths. And so I knew that at this level, something would happen to one of the characters that would take them out. And then from then on, that character doesn't appear. And so I can take that into account from the beginning. And so it wasn't too bad. The hardest part was just making sure that each character looked consistent from one illustration to the next. And there is one particular illustration—I'm not going to mention just because I don't want to highlight it—where I feel like that character doesn't really look like that character in the rest of it. But nobody has said anything. So it may just be my own opinion.

DR. DANA: Aw. I'm going to find out which one it is now. [LAUGHTER]

BETSY BIRD: That's the kind of thing that artists notice that no one else notices. They're like, oh, I don't know. The shape of the nose wasn't quite—

DAVID DEEN: Yeah.

DR. DANA: Yeah, but continuity was really hard to write. Time passing was really hard to write. The weather arriving and leaving was really hard to write. Everything converging into one night, overnight in the mountains, and then moving on to the night before falling before the end of the story, that drove me nuts, and who gets left behind and wait, who's that, where are they showing up.

I wonder what it would be like just to write one straight story line. Would I be able to do it? Or would I just be like, hey, I'm in the slow lane. I got this. [LAUGHTER] I feel like I wrote six stories. I did, I guess. So—

BETSY BIRD: You novelists got it easy.


BETSY BIRD: Linear storytelling. What? Not even interesting.

DAVID DEEN: That was one of the things that I had to map out, was I wanted the illustrations to show a progression from the beginning to the end, as the weather got worse. And so I had to
make sure—like at the beginning, you even talked about how they were cold from the beginning. But I wanted to show that visually.

And so even though it was cold, I still had them with their cloaks off at the beginning, in the first few illustrations, and then pulling them more around them as they go on. And then, of course, the snow really hits and gets heavier. And so the climax, at the end, where it's just really intense—

BETSY BIRD: Mhm. Yeah.

DR. DANA: Here's also a cool little side story. Halpra, you'll notice, has a really ragged ear. And Tully has her ear pierced. And the little backstory to that is that Tully and Halpra, they mountaineer a lot since they're sisters. And when Halpra got her ear messed up, Tully pierced hers and sympathy and camaraderie. Keep an eye for their ears in the illustrations as well.

BETSY BIRD: Oh, that's nice. I love little details like that. That's awesome. That's so cool. Well, Dana, you've done so many literary escape rooms. And so this became—I wouldn't say this was an obvious next step after that. But I do think it makes a lot of sense because the connecting thread between the two is that you're giving kids agency in both of these. They're making the choices in the escape room. They're making the choices with this story. And in an era where COVID didn't give us any choices, and in fact, we were all being told what we had to do to stay safe, I think that's very appealing. And was that a conscious decision on your part, when making this project, after the escape rooms?

DR. DANA: That's a really interesting question. And I didn't think about it that way. When I design large-scale events that bring books to life, I bring books to life from all different angles, fiction, non-fiction, science, math, live animals, performances, music, food, all of these different elements that pop it out, with the idea that the child picks their own path through their intellectualism and at the other side of these event tables or these programs, there's someone who can answer questions for them, to fuel that building of their intellectualism as they grow and decide what they're interested in.

So in many ways, I guess this is very much in keeping with Cotsen's philosophy of choosing your own path and being there with as many roads in and resources as we can to make kids be the best learners they possibly can.
BETSY BIRD: Oh, good. Well really, the only other question I have for you then, at this time, is what are you guys working on next? What else do you have a bubbling in the pots?

[LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: You go first, David. We both just froze because I know you're a—

BETSY BIRD: Sorry, I—

DR. DANA [LAUGHING]: I know you're a stay-at-home dad and I know I have two kids. And it's the holidays. So we're just like, what?

DAVID DEEN: Yeah, especially the holidays. Illustration wise, I don't have a whole lot planned. I've just been talking to somebody else about some medical illustrations for a COVID home-test instruction booklet. So that's pretty dry compared to mice, mountaineering through the snow.

BETSY BIRD: However, I would point out that was what Beatrix Potter wanted to do. Yeah, she really specialized in—not medical but in scientific—drawings of plants and things like that. That's what she wanted to do with her life. And they were like, no, you're a lady. And so she wrote mice wearing coats. There's a lot of connections between the medical-illustration world and the illustration of children's book world. I'm just saying. [LAUGHTER]

DAVID DEEN: On top of that, I have some writing that I'm working on, myself. I've got a middle-grade novel that I need to go back and revise and then start sending out to agents, and see if I can book an agent for that, see what happens.

BETSY BIRD: Great. That's awesome.

DR. DANA: So for me—if we decide to do another one—I actually have a really good haunted house one, and that one would have alternate endings. And there would be risk of the house chewing you up and spitting you out. So Betsy, before we go, though, I do have one question for you.

BETSY BIRD: OK.
DR. DANA: And this is related to your latest novel, Long Road to The Circus. Have you ever A, ridden side saddle, B, ridden an ostrich, or C, ridden an ostrich side saddle?

BETSY BIRD: Now these are excellent questions. These are excellent questions that I have never been asked [LAUGHTER]. When I present the book, kids do actually ask about the ostrich a lot, but never about me in relation to the ostrich. We thought, when we were looking to do the author photo, there was some thought that I would maybe be able to find—[LAUGHTER] I had a lead. I had a lead on a Wisconsin ostrich. It fell through, unfortunately. But there was a chance that I could have found myself an ostrich to straddle in some way.

Alas, I did not find the ostrich. And I have never done it. However, we did—somebody—I need to find it again, someone did photoshop my head onto [LAUGHTER] because in the Victorian era, I should say, it was quite the thing to have yourself sitting side saddle on an ostrich and have your professional picture taken because that's what you did because you had nothing else to do apparently.

And so if you Google ‘side saddle on an ostrich’ or if you go to my website, betsybirdbooks.com, and you just go to the bottom of that first page, you'll see a continual sequence of very stern, matron-like women sitting on ostriches with their legs on one side. And so someone put my head on one of them. And that worked out very well. It really does look like I'm on one. So yeah.

DR. DANA: Betsy, I think your ostrich is still out there. Don't give up hope.

BETSY BIRD: Yeah, I won't give up on that ostrich. [LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: Thank you, all of you, for coming on The BiblioFiles today. It's been a really great, chatting about all of this.

BETSY BIRD: Thank you for letting me interview you. Yeah.

DAVID DEEN: It’s a lot of fun.

©2022 the Trustees of Princeton University